TIPS AND DESIGN GUIDANCE
FOR FUTURE REFURBISHMENTS AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

PRACTICALITY

General

Building regulations and conservation issues will dictate certain aspects of almshouse design, especially for listed buildings. Careful thought should be given to future – proofing design solutions to minimise upgrades at a later date. New ideas on design and practical technological solutions should be explored.

The ideas below should be regarded as illustrative rather than definitive:

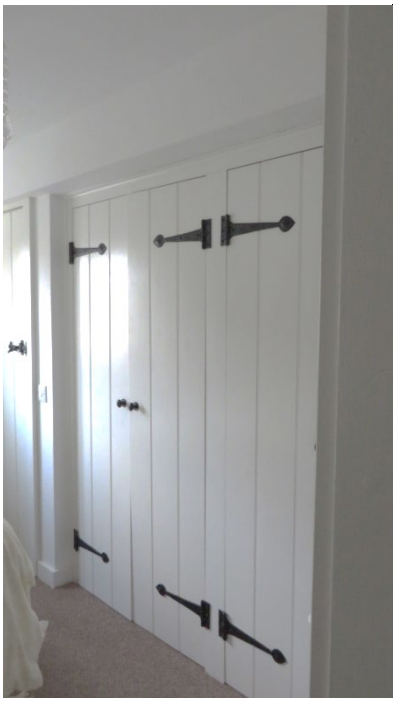
Dwelling/Property Size

Bedsitting rooms no longer meet the rising aspirations of the majority of residents, and should be phased out as and when the opportunity arises. Where space is at a premium, communal laundry rooms avoid the need for individual washing machines, and integrating kitchens with living rooms can help maximise available space.

If possible, it is suggested that almshouse charities provide an en-suite guest room for visitors. Some almshouse charities offset the cost of these rooms by making a modest nightly charge.

Storage Space

Adequate storage space should be well located and thought through. Fitted bedroom cupboards with space for suitcases above generally meet the needs for daily use, but everyone is likely to have other possessions which may need storage and this requirement should be factored into the design. In kitchens, worktops may be adjustable to cater for disabled users and wall cupboards should not be fitted above sinks. Overhead cupboards throughout a dwelling must not be so high as to prevent the average person from reaching them from the ground.




Staircases & Corridors

Staircases should be sufficiently wide and shallow to enable the fitting of a stair lift, unless conventional lifts are installed. Lifts should be sufficiently wide to take stretchers and enable the comfortable use of wheelchairs and electric buggies. Other measures include the fitting of handrails on either side of a staircase, stair wells being well lit, and the edges of steps clearly marked. It is also recommended that handrails are fitted wherever there a steps.


Signs/Legibility

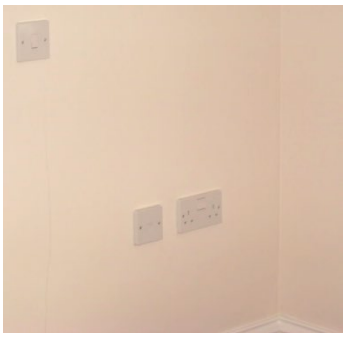
Signs should be well designed, legible, clear and sensibly placed in terms of height and frequency. The combination of upper and lower case text is the easiest to recognise. Too many signs inevitably feel institutional and hence a balance is required.

Floors & Surfaces

Modern floors in kitchens and bathrooms should be made of non-slip and non-reflective material. Carpets and other floor coverings should be plain as opposed to patterned as these are easier to manage for those with poor sight.

Fixtures and Fittings

Lever taps which are easy to turn on and off, and a device for isolating the mains water, positioned at waist height, are recommended. Sufficient power points should be fitted throughout the dwelling and positioned at an appropriate height (usually half a metre from the floor). Light pooling should be avoided. Residents should be able to control heating and lighting easily, and signage and instructions should be legible, clear and unambiguous. Function names on certain switches should be considered for some residents. Alarm cords should be placed where they are unlikely to be hidden or blocked by furniture and so that they are not confused with light switches.



Bathrooms

The installation of wet rooms is strongly recommended where residents are likely to be above retirement age as these avoid steps and lips on shower trays that can create a hazard to people who are frail. Further guidance is given in *Standards of Almshouse Management*. Hoists and other adaptations may be appropriate for certain residents and their installation will depend on the level of accommodation provided, the layout of the building and the attendant cost. Building design should ensure that ceilings are sufficiently strong to support the installation of hoists if they become necessary. Automatic ventilation should be fitted, especially if there is no outside window. Double swing doors enable access from either side in an emergency. Water temperature controls reduce the risk of scalding and water cut off taps would be an advantage. Contrasting colours on bathroom fittings can assist elderly residents. The dimensions of wet rooms should be appropriate for wheelchair access.

Kitchens

Kitchens should always have windows, natural light and adequate ventilation. Sink taps of the lever/paddle variety are recommended and a generous number of plugs and switches fitted at worktop height. Signs for electrical switches should be clear and easy to read. Split level cookers are recommended with a raised oven and worktops should be accessible from a standing position with handles within reach. Adequate space is needed for fridge/freezers and other appliances and floors should be non-slip. It is suggested that where windows are positioned in front of a sink, a window winding handle is fitted to enable residents to open and shut the windows. Whilst there is no blueprint for kitchen design and emerging ideas are constantly offering improvements, the underlying message is to ensure that kitchens are organised for practicality and ease of use. Furthermore, kitchens are more than just a cooking area and thus their design should be bright, welcoming and of good quality.

Pathways

Paths should be flat to avoid trip hazards and allow accessibility around the almshouse areas. These may also benefit from low level lighting. Wheelchair access should be addressed and it may be necessary to agree some basic rules that set out how and where mobility scooters can be used.

Gardens and Outside Spaces

Gardens make an important contribution to the quality of life for residents. There are many examples where residents are allocated individual gardens for their own use, alongside communal areas which can be managed by contract gardeners. These arrangements strike a good balance by enabling residents to continue what may have been a lifetime hobby or pursuit while taking away the pressure of heavy work. Gardens should be colourful, interesting and take account of seasonal changes. Planting should ideally appeal to all the senses: sight, hearing, smell and touch. Shade, benches, tables and chairs all contribute to providing pleasant garden spaces.

Mobility Scooters

An increasing number of residents are using mobility scooters, which risk blocking entrances and inhibiting emergency evacuation unless special provision is made. Mobility scooters require suitable garaging /storage space and charging facilities. The store should be located within reasonable reach of the almshouses.

Safety and Security

Safety and security is extremely important for almshouses and 'Secure by Design' is a respected method recommended by the police for helping designers enhance security. The Almshouse Association can also advise on suggested practices. There are a range of technologies that should be well researched that restrict access to buildings and assist residents. Main entrances, corridors and areas immediately outside individual flats can be monitored by cameras, which reveal the identity of callers via the resident's television. Key safes can be used for spare keys and individual homes should be fitted with lever locks. Lifeline emergency cover offers additional peace of mind for those responsible for the duty of care as a resident can seek immediate assistance by activating an emergency button.

SUSTAINABILITY AND DURABILITY

Listed Buildings

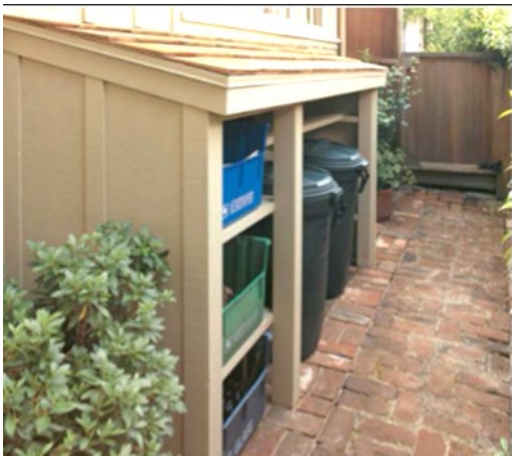
Although alterations to listed buildings no longer qualify as zero rated for VAT purposes, works on energy saving measures are rated at 5%. Charities are advised to discuss their plans with local conservation offices at an early stage to examine what alterations are likely to be approved. Using traditional materials and design solutions, which are "reversible", are more likely to be approved than those that are not.

Design for Maintenance

As a general rule, low capital costs are likely to result in higher maintenance bills. Projects should consider the relative merits of one design against another, having regard for anticipated maintenance. For example, the use of self-cleaning glass for roof glazing; tiles in high usage areas; energy saving boilers, and the need to avoid re-decoration at high level are all important considerations.

Design for the Environment

High levels of insulation, double-glazing and good air-tightness are pre-requisites for modern buildings but these must be balanced against the provision of controlled ventilation. Consideration should be given to practical resource-saving measures such as clothes drying areas, water butts, compost areas and the careful positioning and screening of recycling bins.



Health and Safety

A range of technologies are available to ensure health and safety. Smoke and heat alarms, sprinklers and other fire prevention methods; the ability to turn off appliances remotely which can provide peace of mind to the families of residents living elsewhere; emergency water cut off switch; panic alarms; non slip floors in kitchens and bathrooms; grab handles and stair lifts; emergency keys kept in external safes; electronic proximity locks and lights with movement sensors are all worthy of consideration.

Water & Efficiency

Water saving devices should be installed in cisterns and water saving taps fitted to sanitary ware. Other measures such as greywater recycling should be considered.

Energy Efficiency

All external sides of a building, namely foundations, walls and roof should be well insulated and joints between these elements well detailed to avoid heat loss. Modern boilers will be more efficient and help reduce costs. Thermostats on walls or radiators provide flexibility and value for money without compromising on comfort. Other technologies worthy of consideration include under floor central heating as well as ground and air sourced heat pumps. Solar energy may also offer benefits but care should be taken to evaluate the time required to recoup the investment against the lifespan of equipment installed and future maintenance.

Secondary Glazing

Secondary glazing is a good alternative, more economical, solution to double glazing for refurbishment but almshouse charities occupying listed buildings may need to argue for this as sometimes it is seen to alter the visual appearance. The energy saving argument may be useful in this regard.

Monitoring

Efficiency measures such as the ability to monitor and control energy usage (heat/warmth and light) will save charities and individual residents' money over time. Regular checks to ensure thermostats, boilers and heating system components are set up correctly and functioning properly are important.

Independent Living

There are many aspects of design that can assist if and when residents become frail. Wider doors and entrances ease the use of wheelchairs. Walls and ceilings should be capable of supporting handrails and hoists (if appropriate). Other ideas include kitchen units adjustable for height, low set windows so that residents predominantly house bound can see outside from a chair and possible conversion of a ground floor room into a bedroom. These design ideas can be supplemented with technological aids to enable residents to remain independent for longer.